

# Executive Summary

The public health system — local, state, and federal agencies and their private partners — works around the clock to protect people from harmful conditions and to promote healthy behaviors. Through a broad range of critical activities, from fighting epidemics to safeguarding drinking water, the public health system reduces disease and injury, as well as the health care costs associated with them.

The public places high value on public health services and expects that government will ensure that the public health system can provide basic protection and prevention all the time.

Prevention and protection save huge costs to society, yet public health programs have been critically underfunded. Nationally, population-based public health services amount to only about 1% of the trillion dollars spent annually for health care. Today, population

growth and funding pressure throughout government jeopardize public health protection just when it is most needed.

If we fail to invest in an adequate public health system, we will pay a high price in the future, as old diseases return, and new health threats emerge. But if we invest in prevention today, we will avert high costs of illness and environmental degradation — and enjoy healthier lives.

Since the Legislature initiated the Public Health Improvement Plan in 1993, Washington has made significant investments to strengthen its public health system at the state and local levels. Today, health officials throughout the state participate in a vastly enhanced communication network that provides instant information about public health threats. Laboratory innovations provide more rapid identification of causes of disease when an outbreak occurs. New partnerships increase the effi-

cient use of funds. Every local health jurisdiction has completed a community health assessment to set local priorities for action and uses funds the Legislature has provided for community-based health improvement initiatives.

Much is being accomplished, but much more remains to be done. Serious challenges to our health remain, and Washington's public health officials have identified actions we can take now that will determine how healthy we will be in the future.

In this report, we outline significant challenges that will affect our health in the future, describe accomplishments to date, and provide action plans to address those challenges at a statewide level. We also describe how local communities are putting public health improvement ideas to work throughout the state and the unique local challenges they see for the years ahead.

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# Investing in a Healthier Washington

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The 1998 Public Health Improvement Plan describes specific action plans and illustrates why they are important. The following three steps will help us create a healthier future.

## 1. Strengthen the public health system (page 26).

- Track health problems and outcomes using a core set of health indicators, creating a “report card” for Washington’s health that can be monitored on a continuous basis.
- Set basic standards for all public health agencies so that all residents are guaranteed a basic level of public health protection.
- Address barriers that keep people from getting the health care they need.

## 2. Invest in strategies to improve our health (page 28).

- Promote healthy aging.
- Make child care safe and healthy.
- Protect the public from emerging and antibiotic-resistant diseases.
- Improve food safety in the home and in commercial settings.
- Assure safe, adequate, and reliable drinking water.
- Promote safe and effective student health services.

## 3. Support community-level health improvement (page 37).

- Provide flexible funding so that communities can meet their most pressing needs, involving a broad range of partners in setting and achieving health improvement goals in such areas as —

drinking water  
communicable disease  
child care  
dental care  
family support  
on-site sewage  
health care access  
health education